

Back to work on education funding

by [KATIE METZGER](#), Mercer Island Reporter Staff Writer
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As students prepare to go back to school, the Washington State Supreme Court has ordered the Legislature to go back to work to fulfill its 'paramount duty' — fully funding education.

The order, given Aug. 13, imposed a fine of \$100,000 per day until the Legislature adopts a complete plan for complying with its earlier McCleary decision by the 2018 school year.

The Supreme Court found the state in contempt on Sept. 11, 2014, but held back sanctions until the completion of the 2015 Legislative Session.

"After the close of that session and following multiple special sessions, the State still has offered no plan for achieving full constitutional compliance by the deadline the legislature itself adopted," the order stated.

Gov. Jay Inslee met with legislative leaders on Monday to discuss the order and next steps.

"There is much that needs to be done before a special session can be called," Inslee said in a statement. "I will ask lawmakers to do that work as quickly as humanly possible so that they can step up to our constitutional and moral obligations to our children and lift the court sanctions."

Inslee said the state has already taken "significant steps."

The Legislature passed an operating budget that invested an additional \$1.3 billion in Pre-K-12, a "major victory for education in Washington," said Rep. Tana Senn (D-Mercer Island).

More than \$100 million went to quality early learning programs, all-day kindergarten was fully funded statewide, class sizes in grades K-3 were reduced and funding was allocated to new teacher training and mentoring programs as well as a cost of living adjustment for teachers, Senn said. The budget, which also reduced college tuition, was finally agreed upon after a record-setting 176-day session.

But the court found that it wasn't enough.

Justices questioned whether the state devoted enough money to class-size reduction and ruled that the state's underfunding of education has forced local school districts to rely too heavily on local property-tax levies.

"All along, McCleary said two things: that we have to amply fund K-12 education, all day kindergarten, MSOC [materials, supplies and operating costs] and lower class sizes in K-3, and the other part was balancing the levies," Senn told the Reporter. "We're getting called back because we only did half ... What we did not address is where the money is coming from."

There were many proposals to reform the use of local levies. One, co-sponsored by state Sen. Steve Litzow (R-Mercer Island), aimed to create a more sustainable system by shifting responsibility from local levies to the state common-schools levy, but it may have raised property taxes in districts like Mercer Island.

Democrats wanted to bring in money for schools by imposing a capital gains tax, but Republicans were adamant that the state did not have to raise taxes to balance the budget.

Senn said that new revenue is the "elephant in the room," and that she would support a capital gains tax over a property tax increase, especially with income inequality related to education. Senn also said that any levy swap would have to be a "fair solution."

"We don't want to get to a lukewarm middle where we decrease the quality of some schools," she said. "We want to increase the quality of all schools."

Aside from basic education funding, Senn and Litzow worked the Early Start Act — a "historical investment" in early learning — and on a bill to set statewide standards for Social-Emotional Learning, helping kids work on relationship building, self-management and empathy.

Senn said that the sanctions were not related to the Legislature's decision to suspend I-1351, a voter-approved initiative to reduce K-12 class sizes that did not come with a funding source.

"Reducing K-3 [class sizes] is part of 1351," she said. "We're moving in that direction."

The Legislature isn't scheduled to resume until January, by which the fines could total \$15 million.

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